

The STRANGE CASE of Dr. BEDDOES

'Do you know Beddoes?' The answer will be
 some
 murmur about *Death's Jest-Book*. 'But his
 father?' A
 shadowy vision may rise in the memory of an
 eccentric
 old gentleman leading a cow up his patients'
 staircases to
 improve the air in their bedrooms. This much
 of immor-
 tality blesses the human clay which has had
 the good
 fortune to be imprinted in passing by the
 light toe of
 Lytton Strachey. The author of *Books and
 Characters* has
 wedded poor Dr. Beddoes to that cow. Man
 cannot put
 them asunder now, nor death part them. And
 yet Dr.
 Beddoes was famous once. Kant admired his
Essay on
Consumption. Southey wrote of him: 'From
 Beddoes I
 hoped for more good for the human race
 than from any
 other individual/ Coleridge, the doctor's
 patient at one
 period in his long struggle with opium, was
 overwhelmed
 at his death: 'I felt that more had been taken
 out of my
 life by this than by any former event/ Dr.
 Beddoes does
 indeed deserve a little twig or two of laurel
 on his own
 account; the son-in-law of Richard
 Edgeworth, brother-
 in-law of Maria, and father of the most
 macabre of
 English poets, was also remarkable in a less
 relative way
 and a very strange figure indeed himself.

Thomas Beddoes was born at Shifhal in
 1760. Even
 as a small child he refused to play games. At
 school his
 companions wondered 'why he was always

thinking',
without however taking the steps usual in
places of
education to prevent such behaviour: *for
his silence',
says Dr. Stock, his fellow-physician and
biographer, 'was
not the silence of moroseness, but was
frequently inter-
rupted by some friendly remark which he
made to one
playful group after another, as he passed
them in suc-
cession'. From this scene of precocious
condescension he